

Book review

KATE EDGER: THE LIFE OF A PIONEERING FEMINIST

Diana Morrow

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Diana Morrow's *Kate Edger: The life of a pioneering feminist* delivers a timely and engaging account of Kate Edger, who, in 1877 at the age of 20, became the country's first female university graduate and the first woman in the British Empire to receive a Bachelor of Arts (in mathematics). Morrow's biography is meticulously crafted, a rare and intimate portrait of a first-wave feminist curated by a diligent historian. Drawing extensively on Edger's family history, Morrow delicately demonstrates the integral relationship between Edger's liberalism and Christian evangelism, facets of her moral education that were mutually exclusive and therefore 'inextricable from her feminism and from her efforts to introduce supportive legislation on behalf of women and children' (p. 13).

In *Kate Edger*, Morrow produces an immediate response to the sparse attention given to the 'nature and significance of [Edger's] ideas and achievements in social activism and reform', noting that prior writing – such as Beryl Hughes' 1993 account in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, and Katrina Ford's 2017 biography *Unpretending excellence* – singularly highlights Edger's achievement as a 'pioneer of women's higher education' (p. 19). Where Morrow pivots her account from this direction, she delivers a flourishing narrative of Edger's 'often overlooked' achievements alongside her 'active' brand of feminism (p. 20). Morrow makes it clear that Edger's accomplishments undoubtedly extend beyond her early intellectual pursuits, but hers is still a life that unequivocally validates the 'long-term impact of [...] placing a high value on educating girls, taking their intellectual development seriously and preparing them for tertiary study on an equal basis with men' (p. 82).

Morrow's early chapters cleverly juxtapose the 'eminent success' of Edger as a university graduate with the legacy of her 'deeply religious nonconformist' parents, Samuel and Louisa Edger. Her family portrait reveals their philosophical influence, as much as it illustrates their modest position in a social milieu increasingly concerned with developing women's intellect. The reverend Samuel Edger's sermons and lectures reflect his radical views on pacifism and anti-imperialism, as well as his advocacy for the rights of Māori as citizens and the rights of Chinese against a swell of racism. His active support of 'outspoken early feminist' Mary Colcough (Polly Plum) had an incalculable impact on his daughters (p. 34). The scrupulous research of Kate Edger's early family life as European settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand easily foregrounds the subject's later work in women's equality and social reform. In chapter two, the historical context for Edger's tertiary success is the central focus, with Morrow reframing Edger's achievement as a direct result of earlier campaigning by Learmonth White Dalrymple,

founder of Otago Girls' High School, and Major John Richardson. Described by Morrow as 'the Dunedin pioneers', we get a clear sense of their importance and the mitigating political factors that benefited Edger. Chapters three and four detail Edger's teaching at Christchurch Girls' High School, her postgraduate life at Canterbury College, and her eventual appointment in 1883 as the founding principal of Nelson College for Girls. Edger's experiences in these chapters, as Morrow reminds us, 'offer a rare insight into the origins and development of women's education in New Zealand' (p. 63).

By chapter five, we are convinced of Edger's successful professional life and her influence in women's secondary and tertiary education. Edger's marriage to Williams Albert Evans and their subsequent involvement with the Forward Movement (covered in chapters five and six) neatly moves the reader into the campaign for women's suffrage, and Edger's lifelong involvement with the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Morrow considers in depth the influence of religious nonconformism on Edger's desire for social reform and equality, clearly demonstrating a reality 'much more complex than the stereotype suggests' (p. 128). In perhaps the most compelling section of *Kate Edger*, chapter seven carefully catalogues her tireless advocacy as the Wellington branch President of the Society for the Protection of Women and Children (SPWC), as much as it chronicles the early beginnings of social work in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Edger and her colleagues promoted widespread social, legal and economic reform for vulnerable women and children, and Morrow highlights their legacy in promoting sexual health and well-being at a time when the subject of incest and abuse was 'kept secret or denied altogether' (p. 149). The story of Edger's involvement with setting up the Wellington branch of the Plunket Society, alongside fellow members (and friends) Anna Paterson Stout and Lily Atkinson, is somewhat sandwiched between Edger's early SPWC work and her campaign to introduce the subject of 'domestic science' to the national curriculum. While Morrow does well to include the many and varied threads in the tapestry of Edger's life, the book's final chapters – Edger's Post-War involvement with the League of Nations Union – feel slightly cramped. There is no shortage of material for Morrow, and it would be interesting to see whether a separate project is necessary to truly capture Edger's energetic support of internationalism.

Morrow presents a comprehensive account of Kate Edger's public life, boldly shifting the historical narrative away from Edger's early success as the country's first woman to graduate from university. Through the lens of Aotearoa/New Zealand's first graduate woman, the reader gets a sense of Morrow's precision and technique, her ability to reconstruct a life's narrative as expansive as it is particular. Too often does biography pore over the intimate details of a subject's personal affairs, and Morrow's acknowledgment of scanty evidence for Edger's private life is duly countered by her subject's sweeping influence over social reform; as Morrow reminds us, Edger's significance 'has left richer sources in the historical record' (p. 9). Initially conceived as a history of the Edger family, Morrow's thoughtful arrangement of Kate Edger's life makes direct reference to the family's personal records. A considerate selection of photographs and prints regularly appear throughout the book and Morrow opens each chapter of Edger's life with epigraphs sourced from the subject's contemporaries: authors, former prime ministers, and even Edger herself. However, some readers will find Morrow's reference to her subject as 'Kate' a little uncomfortable. There is an undeniable familiarity here from the historian, a sense of fellowship and presumption of intimacy that seemingly breaks the formality of biography. But it does little to detract from Morrow's overall achievement with *Kate Edger*, and the reader will delight in the many vignettes peppered throughout the book: a teenage Edger's admirable performance in a spelling bee; debating with the Dialectic Society under the guidance of her mentor, Professor John Macmillan Brown; Edger's wildly popular lecture on George Eliot; and her various writings while associate editor of the WCTU's *White Ribbon* magazine.

But readers may also know that Bessie te Wenerau Grace of Ngāti Tūwharetoa was the first Māori woman to graduate from university, and I pause here to consider her absence in Morrow's epilogue: while Grace later graduated with a Master of Arts (first-class) from University of London in 1927, she began her academic life at Nelson College for Girls in 1899 (though Edger herself resigned on her marriage to Evans in 1890). Grace's whakapapa and international career as a teacher and principal deserve a biography all of their own, a task far beyond the scope of Morrow's *Kate Edger*. But it remains an oversight that the subject's connection to the first wahine Māori to receive a degree – from any university – is overlooked. A study of recent Māori graduates found that almost half (48%) were the first in their family to attend university, one third are parents, and over two thirds (70%) are women (Theodore et al., 2015). Achieving positive outcomes for Māori through success in higher education is an ongoing priority for universities in Aotearoa/New Zealand. While the book makes direct reference to wahine Māori supporting WCTU and women's suffrage, it seems, perhaps, that Edger, like most Pākehā first-wave feminists, remained unaware of the issues affecting Māori.

Where to, then, with Edger's legacy? Today, the Kate Edger Educational Charitable Trust dedicates funds to promote women's higher education, as well as providing academic dress hire for university graduands. Moreover, Edger's wide-reaching influence on contemporary social reform is readily visible, and recent legislative changes for victims of sexual violence, a campaign led by Jan Logie, then-Under-Secretary to the Minister of Justice (Domestic and Sexual Violence), immediately comes to mind. Whether it is the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's recommendation in 2019 to cease penalising solo mums on a benefit who did not name their child's father; or the current Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care; or the advocacy for reform by prison abolitionist organisation People Against Prisons Aotearoa; or the White Ribbon campaign against intimate partner violence, there is no branch of social activism that does not, at some point, hark back to Edger and her contemporaries' radical work. What remains to be seen, however, is the effect of Edger's legacy on gender equity in higher education across Aotearoa/New Zealand. In our universities, it has been observed that 'a man's odds of being ranked professor or associate professor are more than double a woman's of a similar research score, age, field, and university', and, over the course of a woman's academic career, she will experience a 'lifetime gender pay gap' of around \$400,000; if current hiring practices do not change, for most fields that gap 'will never disappear' (Brower and James, 2020).

In general, *Kate Edger* will appeal to those readers interested in a comprehensive biography of one of the country's enduring feminist forebears, women whose histories are too often largely absent from our shelves. Morrow's work is a crucial study toward understanding the early social, political and economic context for the myth of egalitarianism in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A footnote from Morrow points out that 'book-length biographies of New Zealand first-wave feminists are rare and often pay little attention to religious belief' (pp. 231-232). On this charge alone, Morrow's *Kate Edger* is an exception and her thorough research is deserving of recognition. It is a beautiful and well-written book: a welcome addition to anyone's collection.

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